

and reject Russia's occupation and attempted annexation of Crimea, and remain committed to

working with Ukraine and other partners to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With United States Ambassador to Afghanistan James B. Cunningham, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, Commander General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., USMC, and Senior Military Leadership at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan

May 25, 2014

The President. Well, I just want to take a few minutes to say thank you to all of you. The main reason I took this trip—in addition to bringing Brad Paisley—is to make sure that everybody here knows, as we're coming into Memorial Day weekend, we're aware of the sacrifices that so many have made on behalf of our freedom here in Afghanistan, and also to make sure that we're reminded of the sacrifices you and your families make every single day.

This is a tough job. But as I came down the stairs, I had a chance to see the Twin Towers on a poster. Some of you know that I had the chance to visit the 9/11 Memorial Museum that's just gone up in New York. And it's a reminder of why we're here. We are now in the process of transition, and I've been getting constant updates from General Dunford and Jim about the progress that we've made. We've seen an election in Afghanistan, at least in the first round, go successfully. And I'm going to have to make some decisions in conjunction with the folks on the ground about how we manage the transition not just through the end of this year, but post-2014. And we'll probably be announcing some decisions fairly shortly. But I thought it was important for me to make sure that I check in directly with folks face to face before those decisions were finally made.

I'm impressed with not just the progress that's been made, but the dedication and the can-do spirit that is continually exhibited throughout this war theater, and I just want to say thank you for that. And Joe has given me, I think, a fairly detailed briefing about what current plans are and the progress we're making with the training of Afghan forces. I think it has gone—I'll be honest with you—better than I might have expected just a year ago, and that's a testament to the great work that all of you have done, as well as the pride the Afghan people have taken in the possibility of being able to secure their own country and install a government that's accountable to them.

And so I very much appreciate all the great work that you have done. And I appreciate it. And I think the American people thank you as well.

Gen. Dunford. Thanks, Mr. President.

The President. All right?

Thank you, guys.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:25 p.m. in the Joint Operating Center. In his remarks, he referred to musician Brad D. Paisley, who traveled with the President aboard Air Force One and performed a concert for the troops that evening.

Remarks to United States Troops at Bagram Air Base

May 25, 2014

The President. Hello, Bagram!

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. Hooah! Well, I know it's a little late, but I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by. First of all, I want every-

body to give a huge round of applause to your commander, General Joe Dunford. Please give him an outstanding, rousing acknowledgment. I am grateful to him for his leadership of our coalition here in Afghanistan and for his

lifetime of distinguished service to the Marine Corps and to America.

And can everybody please give it up to Brad Paisley? Now, I want to say this about Brad. First of all, he's a great supporter of our troops, a great supporter of your families. Two years ago, we had him at the White House to perform for troops and military families during the Fourth of July celebration. Him coming here today was not easy. He had just started a tour, and he had to juggle a lot of stuff and had to try to figure out how to explain it to people without explaining it to people, and his wife and two young sons and promoters and agents—and without going into the details—this was a big sacrifice for him. And he did it because he cares so deeply about you. So I'm so grateful to him.

I want to make clear, though, I will not be singing so——

Audience members. Aww.

The President. Oh, you really want me to sing, huh? *[Applause]* No, no, no. But I do want to just say to Brad, thank you so much for doing this.

I want to acknowledge our outstanding Ambassador, Jim Cunningham, who's here with his lovely wife. And Jim leads an incredible team of civilians at our Embassy and across this country. They are also making sacrifices, also away from their families, oftentimes themselves at risk as they serve. I know those of you in uniform couldn't do your jobs without these Americans as your partners. So we salute the dedicated service of all the civilians who are here, led by Jim Cunningham. Give them a big round of applause.

Now, I guess I also should mention that we've got a few folks here as part of the 10th Mountain Division—*[applause]*—"Climb to Glory." We've got the 455th Airwing in the house. *[Applause]* The Task Force Muleskinners. *[Applause]* Task Force Thunder. *[Applause]* Task Force Rugged.

Audience member. Yeah!

The President. *[Laughter]* To all of you: I'm here on a single mission, and that is to thank you for your extraordinary service. I thank you as our—as your Commander in Chief, because

you inspire me. Your willingness to serve, to step forward at a time of war and say, "Send me," is the reason the United States stays strong and free. Of all the honors that I have as serving as President, nothing matches serving as your Commander in Chief.

But I'm also here representing 300 million Americans who want to say thank you as well. I know sometimes, when you're over here, away from home, away from family, you may not truly absorb how much the folks back home are thinking about you. So I just want you to know when it comes to supporting you and your families, the American people stand united. We support you. We are proud of you. We stand in awe of your service.

And you can see it in American actions every single day. You see it in the kids across America who send you all those care packages and all those Girl Scout cookies. *[Applause]* Those are pretty popular, huh? You like those cookies, huh? All right. I'll bet you'll get some more now.

You see it in the neighbors and the coworkers who volunteer to help your moms and dads and wives and husbands and sons and daughters at school and on their sports teams. You see it at the airports when you return stateside, all the folks standing up, applauding, lining up to shake your hand and welcoming you home.

You see it when entire stadiums get to their feet to salute our troops and our veterans. Just the other day, I welcomed the Super Bowl Champion Seattle Seahawks, and——

Audience members. Woo!

Audience members. Boo!

The President. Listen, I'm a Bears fan, but I—but the one thing that I saw and I've seen in every sports team that comes to the White House is the work that they do, visiting Walter Reed, Bethesda, doing work with military families. In fact, to help announce their draft picks this month, the Seattle Seahawks selected Jeff Baker, who's a Seahawks fan, but also a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan and a proud sergeant in the U.S. Army, to make that draft pick. Because they wanted to send a signal that we love our sports and we love our football—that's fun

and games—but this is the competition that counts, and these are the real heroes.

You see America's gratitude every time I present a veteran of Afghanistan with our Nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor. We bestow that medal on an individual. But every time—every time—that we bestow that medal, whoever is the recipient says he accepts it on behalf of the whole team and everybody who wears the uniform of the American Armed Forces. And when those citations are read, Americans all across the country stop, and they listen, and they're stirred by the sacrifices you render for each other and for all of us.

So I'm here to say thank you, and I'm here to say how proud I am of you. And I'm here to say how proud I am of your families, because in some ways—in ways large and small—they're sacrificing just like you are.

But I'm also here because after more than a decade of war, we're at a pivotal moment. Last year marked a major milestone: For the first time, Afghan forces took the lead to secure their own country. And today, you're in a support role, helping to train and assist Afghan forces. For many of you, this will be your last tour in Afghanistan. And by the end of this year, the transition will be complete, and Afghans will take full responsibility for their security, and our combat mission will be over. America's war in Afghanistan will come to a responsible end.

Now, that progress is because of you and the more than half a million Americans—military and civilian—who have served here in Afghanistan. And I don't want you to ever forget why you are here or how vital your mission is to our national security.

Some of you may know, recently, I was in New York City, and we were there to dedicate the new 9/11 Museum. I had time to spend with the survivors and with the families who lost loved ones and with the first responders who had rushed to the scene and had a chance to ponder the portraits and the biographies of the thousands who were killed that day and to think about those who were killed in Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon. And once again, we

resolved to never forget what happened on that September day and to do everything in our power to prevent something like that from ever happening again. That's why you're here. That's why you're here.

And I notice—some of you don't remember—because as I was getting a briefing while Brad was singing, I saw a picture of the Twin Towers in the operation room nearby, so I know you don't forget.

And 4 years ago, on my first visit to Bagram as President, I laid out our mission. And General Dunford and Ambassador Cunningham just gave me a briefing on your progress. And today, every single one of you, everybody who has served here, and all the members of our coalition can be proud because you are completing our mission. You're completing the mission.

We said that we were going to deny Al Qaida safe haven. And since then, we have decimated the Al Qaida's leadership in the tribal regions, and our troops here at Bagram have played a central role in supporting our counterterrorism operations, including the one that delivered justice to Usama bin Laden. So, along with our intelligence personnel, you've helped prevent attacks and save American lives back home. Al Qaida is on its heels in this part of the world, and that's because of you.

We said that we were going to reverse the Taliban's momentum. And so you went on the offensive, driving the Taliban out of its strongholds. Look, everybody knows Afghanistan still is a very dangerous place. Insurgents still launch cowardly attacks against innocent civilians. But just look at the progress that you've made possible: Afghans reclaiming their communities, and more girls returning to school, dramatic improvements in public health and life expectancy and literacy. That's your legacy. That's what you did. Even with all the challenges, more Afghans have hope for their future. And so much of that is because of you.

We said that we were going to strengthen the capacity of Afghan forces so they could take more responsibility for their own security. So you've been training Afghan forces and building Afghan forces up. And we know

they've still got a long way to go. But for nearly a year, Afghans have been in the lead, and they're making enormous sacrifices. You look at the casualties they're taking on. They are willing to fight. Afghan forces are growing stronger. Afghans are proud to be defending their own country, and that again, so much of that is because of you.

Think about last month's election. Despite all the threats from the Taliban, the Afghan people refused to be terrorized. They registered to vote. Afghan security forces secured thousands of polling places. Then millions of Afghans lined up to cast their ballot. And next month's runoff will be another step toward the first democratic transfer of power in the history of this nation. That's a tribute to the courage and determination of the people of Afghanistan. But it is also a tribute to you and the sacrifices of so many Americans and our coalition partners, everything that you've done over the years.

Now we know that this progress has come at a heavy price. Tomorrow is Memorial Day. And at bases here in Afghanistan and the towns across America, we will pause and we'll pay tribute to all those who've laid down their lives for our freedom. And that includes nearly 2,200 American patriots who made the ultimate sacrifice, that "last full measure of devotion," right here in Afghanistan. I know you've stood in front of those battle crosses. I know many of you carry the memories of your fallen comrades in your heart today. We will honor every single one of them, not just tomorrow, but forever.

And I want you to know, our gratitude is shared by the Afghan people. One of them—one of Afghanistan's leading women, a Member of Parliament—recently wrote an open letter. I don't know if many of you had a chance to see it. She described all the changes that have taken place here, including the millions of girls going to school and pursuing their dreams. And she wrote this—I want you to listen to this—she wrote: "It's been a difficult journey, marked by blood and violence, but we have made significant gains and achievements, which would not have been possible without

the generous support of the international community, especially the American people." Especially the American people. She's talking about all of you. She's talking about your families. She's talking about those who we've lost. That's the difference—and the legacy—that you can be proud of.

Now, even as our combat mission ends later this year, I want everybody to know, in this country and across the region, America's commitment to the people of Afghanistan will endure. With our strategic partnership, we'll continue to stand with Afghans as they strengthen their institutions, as they build their economy, as they improve their lives: men and women and boys and girls.

And I've made it clear that we're prepared to continue cooperating with our Afghan partners on two security missions: training and equipping Afghan forces and targeting—counterterrorism targets against Al Qaida. And once Afghanistan has sworn in its new President, I'm hopeful we'll sign a bilateral security agreement that lets us move forward. And with that bilateral security agreement, assuming it is signed, we can plan for a limited military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014. Because after all the sacrifices we've made, we want to preserve the gains that you have helped to win. And we're going to make sure that Afghanistan can never again—ever—be used again to launch an attack against our country.

So our combat mission here will come to an end. But our obligations to you and your families have only just begun. The Al Qaida leadership may be on the ropes, but in other parts of the world, Al Qaida affiliates are evolving and pose a serious threat. We're going to have to stay strong, and we're going to have to stay vigilant. And fortunately, we've got the best led, best trained, best equipped military in human history. And as Commander in Chief, I'm going to keep it that way.

We're going to stay strong by taking care of your families back home. The First Lady, Michelle, and Vice President Joe Biden's wife Jill have made this their mission, because your families serve too. They're heroes on the home front. And so we're going to keep joining

Forces to make sure more Americans are stepping up to support and honor those extraordinary families.

We're going to stay strong by taking care of our wounded warriors and our veterans. Because helping our wounded warriors and veterans heal isn't just a promise, it's a sacred obligation. And as you come home, some of you will return to civilian life, and we want to make sure you can enjoy the American Dream that you helped to defend. So with the transition assistance to help you begin the next chapter of your life, that's going to keep America strong. The credentials and licenses to help you find a job worthy of your incredible skills, that will keep America strong. Making sure the post-9/11 GI bill is in place and delivering for you the kind of education that you have earned, that will keep America strong.

And I keep on saying to every company back home, "If you want somebody who knows how to get the job done, hire a vet."

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. Hire a vet. [Applause] Hire a vet. Because like generations before you, we need you to help us write the next great chapter in the American story, and I know you'll do that because I've seen the character of your service, and I know the strength of our country.

Going back to New York and thinking about that tragedy 12 years ago, in those awful moments after the Twin Towers fell, as the wreckage was still burning, those at the scene were desperately looking for survivors, one of those searching was a detective at the NYPD. And as he climbed through the debris, he spotted something in the rubble. It was a flag. It was torn up. Parts of it were burned, but it was still intact.

And today, that flag is at the 9/11 Museum. It's dusty and it's torn and you can see the burn marks from the fires. That flag has been through a lot. But the thing you notice is, its broad stripes and bright stars still shine. Its red, white, and blue still inspire. After all it's been through, after all America has been through, our flag is still there.

And our flag is still there because when our Nation was attacked, a generation—this generation, the 9/11 generation—stepped up and said, "Send me." Our flag is still there because you've served with honor in dusty villages and city streets and in rugged bases and remote outposts, in Helmand and Kandahar and Khost and Kunar and Paktika and Nuristan. Our flag is still there because through this long war, you never wavered in your belief that people deserve to live free from fear, over here and back home. Our flag will always be there, because the freedom and liberty it represents to the world will always be defended by patriots like you.

So I'm here to say thank you. I'm here to say I'm proud of you. The American people are proud of you. God bless you. God bless the United States Armed Forces. And God Bless our United States of America.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:14 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., USMC, commander, international Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan; musician Brad D. Paisley, his wife Kimberly Williams-Paisley, and their sons Huck and Jasper; Leslie Genier, wife of U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan James B. Cunningham; Purple Heart recipient Sgt. Jeffery C. Baker, USA; and Fawzia Koofi, Vice President, National Assembly of Afghanistan.

Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia May 26, 2014

Thank you so much. Please be seated. Thank you, Secretary Hagel, for your introduction and for your lifetime of service, from a young Army sergeant in Vietnam to our Nation's 24th Secretary of Defense.

Vice President Biden, Jill, Chairman Dempsey, Major General Buchanan, Patrick Hallinan, Chaplain Brainerd; to our men and women in uniform here and around the world; to our outstanding veterans; and most of all, to